DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 659 UD 019 933

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TITLE Decorum and Discipline: The Politics of Black Exclusion in Secondary Schools.
PUB DATE Mar 79
NOTE 18p.; Based on a paper prepared for the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Black Political Scientists (Washington, D.C., March 22-24, 1979); Not available in paper copy due to reproduction quality of original document; Figure 1 may be marginally legible

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Patterns; *Black Students; Caucasian Students; Discipline Policy; Females; Males; *Racial Differences; Secondary Education; Sex Differences; Student Attitudes; *Student Behavior; *Suspension

ABSTRACT

Data concerning the reported offenses of suspended students in a school district in the southeastern United States are examined to determine whether the disproportionate number of black student suspensions is due to ordinary problems of decorum or to actual challenges to the authority of the school. Offenses attributed to males and to females of both races are described. It is pointed out that the racial pattern of these offenses differs, with blacks being involved in a wider range of authority defiance than whites. This "non-consent" posture taken by blacks is held accountable for their higher suspension rates. Attached tables provide data, by race and sex, on: (1) suspension rates for three academic years; (2) "exclusion rates," i.e., rates based on the actual number of suspensions minus the expected number; (3) most frequently occurring suspendable offenses; (4) student fighting; (5) suspensions for refusing discipline; and (6) a rank ordering of offenses. (Author/EB)

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From a paper prepared presentation at the Annual Meeting of the National Assoc'ation of Black Political Scientists, March 22-24, 1979. Harambee House, Washington, D. C.

UD019933

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Introduction:

In the early 1970's the Southern Regional Council, supported by the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial released the findings of their large scale survey of school leavers. Their conclusion was that a significant number of children were not dropping out of school but were actually being pushed-out by a combination of forces that together were bringing about a wide spread intra-mural resegregation of school children by race. [Robert F. Kennedy Memorial, 1973:14]

Focusing upon schools in the Southeast, the SRC study revealed that as court ordered desegregation became unavoidable, the institutional rules of the schools were being used as resources for returning the school to its prior racially segregated status. Rubel reports that during this period, "de facto" discrimination and classroom segregation persisted through the use of such techniques as ability tracking, and the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of black students. [Rubel, 1977:20]

By far the most comprehensive examination of suspensions and expulsions was published by the Children's Defense Fund in 1975. Of the 24 million students covered by the survey of the U.S. Dep't of Health, Education & Welfare's Office for Civil Rights, over 1 million students (4.2%) were suspended at least once during the 1972-73 school year. School administra-

tors, they found, were most likely to suspend children who were in secondary schools and who were black, male, and poor. [Children's Defense Fund, 1975:56]

As a result of the public attention focused on the schools by these reports, in 1974 the U.S. DHEW Office for Education made funds available to a number of individuals and institutions to, in their words, "investigate the causes for and test solutions to, the disproportionate rate of minority group suspensions, expulsions and other disciplinary problems. This paper is based upon data generated by one of the projects funded under this competition.

Limitations of the Data

It should be remembered that the analysis to be presented here is circumscribed by two factors that serve to limit the generalizability of the data. First, the suspensions reported here occurred within a single county school district in the southeast. Second, the data pertaining to specific offenses resulting in suspension, are available for the 1977-78 school year only.

During the 1977-78 school year there were 1,247 student suspensions recorded in the records of the school district. These suspension records were examined and coded, and a cross tabulation of the offenses with the race and sex of the student was generated. Additional data on suspension and exclusion rates for the district collected over a period of four years is displayed in Tables One and Two and Figure One.

The suspension rate represents the number of formal school suspensions

per one thousand students. The use of an "exclusion rate" was introduced to our project by Dr. Charles Grigg, the Director of The Institute for Social Research at FSU. The exclusion rates displayed in Table Three are computed by taking the actual number of suspensions minus the expected number divided by the expected number of suspensions multiplied by 100. The expected number of suspensions is the product of the multiplication of the percentage of blacks enrolled in the county or school times the total number of suspensions in the county or school. Grigg suggests that "this rate is a more sensitive rate than the suspension rate in that it connects the number of suspensions given to minorities to the proportion of minorities in that particular administrative unit..." In other words, it is a way to express the magnitude of the excess of black suspensions over those one would normally expect blacks to receive if there were no disproportionality in the distribution of discipline cases.

The Suspension Exclusion rates displayed in Table Two can be interpreted in several ways.

1. Although the exclusion rate for the district is lower than it was when we began our project, the fluctuations in the rate over the years makes it difficult to describe any definite trend in the rate.

2. The exclusion rate in schools C & D are for most years, consistently higher than those found in schools A & B. (one anomoly = D, '76-'77)

The Problem

It has been suggested that both the rate of minority student suspensions

and the type of offense committed by the minority student may reflect only a tendency toward more boistrous and aggressive action on the part of these students rather than a school related management problem. In this view, the problem of the over-representation of minority youngsters becomes a matter of concern for the psychologist or school nurse rather than the political scientist. Behavior problems are seen as caused by the failure of individuals to adjust to the rules of the school. The rules are assumed to be fair and punishment for their infraction is assumed to be equitably distributed.

However, when suspensions are distributed consistently in a way that yields a disproportional number of occurrances involving minority children, one may well be moved to ask if an examination of the specific misconduct engaged in, or school rule violated, can indicate whether we are confronted with ordinary problems of decorum or with actual challenges to the authority of the school.

Findings

Erikson suggested that disruptive unrest represented student actions entirely different from past violations of school disciplinary codes. [Erikson, 1969:10] He suggested that "disruptions" differed from ordinary disciplinary infractions in that they involved groups, the student activity undertaken was calculated to disrupt the functioning of the school; and the groups involved utilized techniques of collective protest. Following Erikson, Hagstrom and others, social scientists and educators in the 1970's continued to distinguish ordinary violations of school decorum from politically relevant school disruptions. Bailey found that school disruptions were positively related to inte-

gration and school size and negatively related to low percentages of black staff in integrated schools and average daily attendance.

This paper attempts to build on this earlier work by examining the reported offenses of suspended students. If there is a distinction to be made between the kinds of student behavior Erickson would label politically relevant, and the kind of adolescent behavior that is normally expected of boys and girls at that level of maturity, then the distinction should also appear in the offense label recorded on the suspension record of the child.

Table 3 displays the most frequently occurring suspendable offenses, out of more than 155 separate offenses, and the distribution of these offenses among four student populations.

Student fights of various types represent the occasion for suspension in more cases involving black & white males and black females than any other single offense.

The number of suspensions for these categories involving black females is marginally lower than the number involving black males but higher than the number recorded for either white males or females.

Black males, black females and white males contribute almost equally to suspensions for Disrespecting Authority, Refusing Discipline and Skipping Detention.

Black students were more likely to be cited for being in an "Unauthorized Area" than were white students - especially white male students. Twenty-eight black male suspensions were for this offense, while only <u>five</u> white male offenses were in this category.

Table Four gives us some estimate of the <u>order</u> of the school system.

The fact that this offense, "fighting," has five separate variations indicates the district is attempting to improve the order of the schools by repressing student violence. Fighting of all types represents a significant fraction of the suspensions meted out to all four groups.

Table Five compares the frequency of suspensions for refusing discipline, across all four groups of student suspendees. There were an equal number of black and white suspensions for this offense among the males in the sample. However, black female suspensions in this category exceeded white female suspensions by more than 5 to 1.

Table Six is a rank ordering of frequently occurring offenses by race and sex. Smoking is the most "popular" offense for white females, while the three remaining groups find themselves most often in trouble because of fighting. The males are more inclined to refuse discipline and to fail to show the proper respect to "authority."

Discussion

We intended by this exercise to determine the usefulness of suspension records in the determination of the character and political relevance of student rule breaking. Although the categories are probably anything but discreet, they are still of use to us because they represent the formal label put upon a behavioral incident by school authorities. Whether three independent observers would code the behavior as the authority figure labeled, it is not germane to our present discussion. The decision to affix a particular "offense label," to a particular occurrence is made by the school au-

thority who begins the process. The choice of an offense label is therefore an important indicator of the way the behavior in question is perceived by those in a position to support their opinion through force.

Black and white males, perhaps because of the masculine tendancy to rebel against the rules of an essentially female institution, display similar patterns of defiance. However, black males are involved in a wider range of authority defiance than are white males. Moreover, cutting classes and smoking represents a significant fraction of the number of white suspensions, but few black infractions were for breaking these rules.

The suspensions for fighting no doubt represent the schools constant struggle to maintain order. Fighting is heavily sanctioned and those who use violence to settle disputes are likely to face suspension rather than some lighter punishment.

If we ignore for the moment, the several categories that collectively define instances of student violence, we find that the suspensions given to black females differ from those given white females in that some interaction with the student during the course of the event involves an authority figure. Said another way, we are saying that except for "Unauthorized Area," both of the high frequency offense categories remaining for black females involves an interaction with an adult.

The pattern of offenses for the males reveals a common stance on the part of these individuals to refuse discipline and to speak as they please when dealing with adult authority figures. Again, however, the black pattern of continued confrontation with authority is maintained while for white males cutting class and smoking become more frequent offenses.

It is clear that a number of times last year administrators and teachers in the district confronted black children who indicated that the authority represented by these persons was not held in high esteem.

We may conclude that the pattern of these offenses reveals a form of student behavior frequently observed in desegregated schools. It is characterized by a posture of non-consent. If the school's authority is not supported by a reservoir of consensual acceptance, especially as it pertains to black student discipline matters, then to maintain order sheer force must be used. It follows that those students who reject the authority of the school administrators as opposed to those students who consent to their authority, will find themselves more often in situations in which the adult chooses to use the power of the rules of the institution to punish them for remaining recalcitrant.

What emerges from this discussion is the identification of a group of students who display patterns of behavior characterized by defiance and violence. As long as they and the majority of their more peaceful peers perceive that the authority of the school is unjust, and therefore unworthy of their consent, we may probably expect that more students will adopt this posture of non-consent. Whether this posture of non-consent ultimately will lead to the kind of collective protest actions reminiscent of the high school activism of the 1960's remains to be seen.

TABLES

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TABLE 1

Comparison of Student Suspension Rates by Race/Sex
1974-75, 1975-76, 1976-77 and 1977-78
for the [redacted] County School District

	Suspensions per 1000				% Change		
	1974-75	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78	74 to 75	75 to 76	76 to 77
[redacted] County Total	81	46	64	58	-43.2	+39.1	-9.4
[redacted]ack Male	178	101	167	125	-43.3	+65.3	-25.1
[redacted]ack Female	123	70	92	90	-43.1	+31.4	-2.2
[redacted]ite Male	57	33	48	48	-42.1	+45.5	-
[redacted]ite Female	22	11	15	19	-50.0	+36.4	+26.7

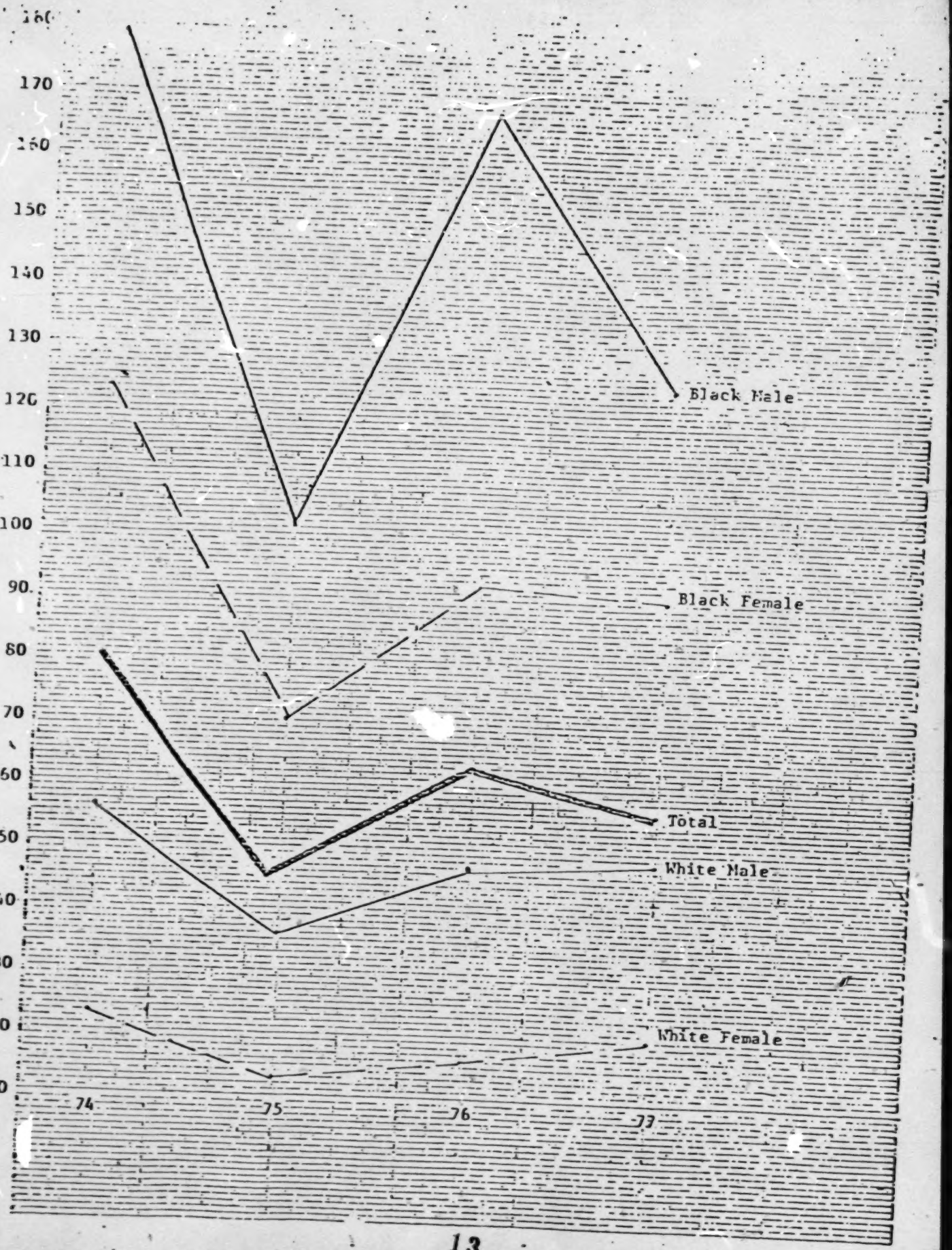
160
170
160
150
140
130
120
110
100
90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
74
75
76
77
Black Male
Black Female
Total
White Male
White Female

TABLE 2

Suspension Exclusion Rates
[redacted] County School District and
Selected Schools

Group	1974-1975	1975-1976	1976-1977	1977-1978
[redacted] County	88	86	103	85
[redacted] A	37	60	54	58
[redacted] B	69	86	60	50
[redacted] C	133	128	199	125
[redacted] D	133	167	52	85

The exclusion rates were computed using the following formula: The actual number of suspensions minus the expected number of suspensions divided by the expected number of suspensions times one hundred. The expected number of suspensions is based on the percentage of blacks enrolled in the county or school times the total number of suspensions in the county or school.

TABLE 3

Most Frequently Occuring Suspendable
Offenses by Race & Sex

Offense	Black Male	Black Female	White Male	White Female	Row Total
Fighting-Student	35	41	35	9	120
Fighting	31	29	20	11	91
Unauthorized Area	28	20	5	10	64
Disrespect Authority	20	18	20	2	60
Refused Discipline	21	13	21	2	57
Skip detention/refused	13	22	11	7	53
Column total	148	143	112	41	

TABLE 4

Fighting, All Categories
by Race & Sex

	Fighting	Fighting, Student	Fight, Start	Fight, Curse	Fight Start and Curse
Black male	31 (34.1)	35 (29.2)	7 (50.0)	3 (18.8)	4 (40.0)
Black female	29 (31.9)	41 (34.2)	6 (42.9)	8 (50.0)	2 (20.0)
White male	20 (22.0)	35 (29.2)	1 (7.1)	4 (25.0)	4 (40.0)
White female	11 (12.1)	9 (7.5)	0 (0)	1 (6.3)	0 (0)
Total	91	120	14	16	10

TABLE 5

Suspensions for Refusing Discipline,
All Categories by Race & Sex

Offense	Black Male	Black Female	White Male	White Female
Refused discipline	21	13	21	2
Tardy & refused discipline	5	6	11	4
ActOut & refused discipline	9	3	6	2
Fight & refused discipline	6	4	4	0
Column total	41	26	42	8

TABLE 6

A Rank Ordering of Offenses
by Race and Sex*

White Females		Black Females		White Males		Black Males	
Smoking	(15)	Fighting, stu.	(41)	Fighting, stu.	(35)	Fighting, stu.	(35)
Fighting	(11)	Fighting	(29)	Fighting	(20)	Fighting	(31)
Unauth. area	(10)	Skip detention	(22)	Ref. discipline	(21)	Unauth. area	(28)
Cut class	(9)	Unauth. area	(20)	Disrespect auth.	(20)	Ref. discipline	(21)
Fighting, stu.	(9)	Disrespect auth.	(18)	Cut class	(17)	Disrespect auth.	(20)
				Smoking	(16)	Insubordination, disrespect	(16)

*At lease 15 occurrences